

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 236 733

CS 504 431

AUTHOR Sillars, Malcolm O.
 TITLE On the State of Speech Communication Research.
 PUB DATE Nov 83
 NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association (Washington, DC, November 10-13, 1983).
 PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Information Analyses (070)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
 DESCRIPTORS *Communication Research; Educational Change; *Educational Trends; *Intellectual History; Professional Associations; Professional Recognition; *Research Methodology; Social Scientists; *Speech Communication; Theories

ABSTRACT

The discipline of speech communication was established early in the twentieth century. After its subject matter was defined and separated from the field of English by Herbert Wichelns's "The Literary Criticism of Oratory," departments were established and a separate organization--The National Association of Teachers of Public Speaking--was formed. In the first issue of "The Quarterly Journal of Public Speaking," James Winans initiated the emphasis on research. Although beginning theory came from classical rhetoric, early writers and researchers were drawn to the behavioral studies of psychologists. Even the emphasis in historical critical research was on learning correct principles rather than on understanding the history of oratory. Since 1950, there has been a growth of attention to informal discourse in dyads and groups, and, more recently, a new influence from some scholars in other fields of the social sciences. Today, with the growing interest in cultural metaphors and naturalistic inquiry, the field of communications is seeing the signs of a radically new synthesis. Communications has the people to make the new syntheses--first class experimentalists, able historians, scholars who understand the cultural role of the media, and critics familiar with the rhetorical tradition and other literary trends. This openness of research, this pluralistic approach to research, characterizes the state of speech communication research today. (HOD)

 * Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
 * from the original document. *

"ON THE STATE OF SPEECH COMMUNICATION RESEARCH"

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

Malcolm O. Sillars

University of Utah

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS
MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Malcolm O. Sillars

* This document has been reproduced as
received from the person or organization
originating it.

Minor changes have been made to improve
reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this docu-
ment do not necessarily represent official NIE
position or policy.

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

I am pleased that this panel is cosponsored by the commission on Communication and Aging because I am about to exhibit a characteristic frequently attributed to Old Buffalos by Johnny Carson and younger scholars. I am about to repeat what I said in my Presidential Address in 1980 and last year in a panel on the history of research in the field.¹ The Commission members correctly recognize that needless repetition is a stereotype and, therefore, will inform you that while it applies to me it does not apply to all Old Buffalos.

The defense for my repetition is that I will attempt to link past and present. The present state of our research is not a recent phenomenon it is a part of a long tradition. To forget that tradition is to set us all to discovering the wheel all over again.

The modern history of the research in our profession began when higher education was going through a revolutionary change. The British system of education emphasised the well rounded gentleman and the gracious lady and was based on a broadly based liberal, classical, integrated education. It was the system we lived under for two centuries. But at the turn of this century the German educational system replaced it. That system emphasised separate disciplines, research for practical benefit and a building blocks system of knowledge.²

Early in the Twentieth Century many of the disciplines we now take for granted were established. Those who failed to identify their

ED236733

CS 504431

discipline were left behind. To prove that there was a discipline it was necessary to, disassociate from other like disciplines, form separate departments, establish a national organization and publish a journal. All these things we did in those early years. In our case Herbert Wichelns' "The Literary Criticism of Oratory" was a crucial document because it separated us from English by defining our subject matter, linking us to a body of theory and identifying a separate methodology. Departments were established, and a separate organization--The National Association of Teachers of Public Speaking was formed. The emphasis on research was initiated by James Winans in the first issue of The Quarterly Journal of Public Speaking.

As Herman Cohen has noted our earliest research emphasised our link to behavioral research.³ Even our historical critical research emphasis was interested in learning correct principles not just understanding the history of oratory. From the beginning right up to today our historical-critical scholarship is much more oriented to methodology than is the scholarship of our colleagues in English or history, for instance. So, most of our historical studies from the beginning were concerned with what Daniel Webster, Edmund Burke, Abraham Lincoln or William Jennings Bryan did in order to build and test laws which could be applied by freshman public speaking students.

Our beginning theory came from classical rhetoric, that is true, but it is significant to note, as Carroll Arnold has, that the earliest writers in our field "were drawn...to the behavioral studies of psychologists like William James, Wilhelm Max Wundt, E.B. Tischer, and others."⁴ The most important text books of the early years, Scott, Phillips, Winans, Wolbert, O'Neill, and Weaver, clearly reveal this orientation."⁵ The early journals reveal this emphasis also.

The chief respondent to this emphasis was Everett Lee Hunt. In 1920 he published "Plato on Rhetoric and Rhetoricians" and began a distinguished tradition of historical and philosophical scholarship. But that tradition, as neo-Aristotelian criticism so eloquently attests, was still adapted by all except a hardy band, such as Karl Wallace, Marie Nichols, Donald C. Bryant, and Dean Hunt, himself, to the practical scientific generalized question "How do you give an effective speech?" The issue was brought home to me a few years ago in a critical methodology class when I pointed out that most historians are very suspicious of any attempt of historical research to generalize beyond a specific event and a student asked, "Then what good is it?"

In summary, we defined a scientific discipline, got separate departments, gave the Ph.D. degree and engaged in research to build useful generalizations. Thus, when the increased emphasis on behavioral research took place after World War II it was not a revolution but a reasonable evolutionary extension on what had been done before. Because the true believers of experimentalism chose, too frequently, to define their differences with the historical-critical scholars as a duel to the death and too many historical-critical true believers did likewise we thought we had a more fundamental division than we really had.

The real addition since 1950 has been the growth of attention to informal discourse in dyads and groups. Remember the earliest post World War II research was on public persuasion with studies of ethos, evidence, organization, reasoning and the like.

In short then the substantial traditions of our field have been built on, or at least colored by, the scientific urge. Even most of our critical scholarship, our rhetorical study, has had a partially hidden but not missing quest for principles of communication which can be applied by others.

While in the post World War II period the growing attention to interpersonal and small group communication brought with it a naturalistic concern for how communication works rather than rules for application and the persuasion emphasis of our experimental research weakened, the rules orientation was not lost. In our historical-critical research the concern for a single paradigm and a rule building orientation has also weakened. Our critical scholarship has seen more emphasis on understanding without application. But the rules orientation to critical scholarship is far from dead. Witness our rhetorically oriented textbooks.

Thus, our research has a strong orientation to the "scientific" search for rules in both our behavioral and historical-critical scholarship while still preserving some humanistic search for understanding in both areas. In addition, there is a new influence derived from some scholars in other fields of the social sciences. That new influence has come as a reaction against the limits imposed on traditional behavioral research. Behavioral research has clean and carefully defined hypotheses and methods for testing them. But it also has narrow limits to what it can say. Social scientists concerned about this narrowness found the dramatism of Kenneth Burke and the cultural and ideological orientation of European researchers. Consequently, the last ten years or so has produced a move toward broader more humanistic concerns in the social sciences in such applications as dramatism, phenomenology and ethnomethodology.

Today, in the field of communication we are seeing the signs of a radical change to a new synthesis. Clifford Geertz has called it "Blurred Genres." He says, "what we are seeing is not just another redrawing of the cultural map--the moving of a few disputed borders, the

marking of some more picturesque mountain lakes--but an alteration of the principles of mapping. Something is happening to the way we think about the way we think."⁶ Geertz is referring to the social sciences but the principle holds for other fields as well. "New Criticism" is increasingly questioned by scholars interested in literary study. In its place is growing up a new relativistic, culturally oriented literary criticism. Historians, freed from the progressive assumptions of inevitable order are reexamining history from a variety of perspectives including a clearly rhetorical one.

In our field the culture metaphors and naturalistic inquiry, where the researcher-scholar-critic admits to being part of the conclusion and not just an objective observer, are growing. And these are exciting times for us because our field has the people to make the new synthesis. We have first class experimentalists. We have able historians, we have scholars who understand the cultural role of the media. We have critics who see the rhetorical tradition and others who can draw on the significant traditions of literary criticism.

This new synthesis is emerging. The real question is: how useful will it be to our understanding of communication? Its usefulness will be a fairly direct correlation, I believe, with the extent to which we are able to preserve a pluralistic approach to it. A new synthesis which develops into the way we do research will be of dubious benefit. It will probably also begin a new process of separation and petty wrangling similar to the period through which we have just passed.

Our intellectual ancestors had a concern for research reflected in the very first issue of our journal. Under the leadership of people like James Winans and Everett Lee Hunt there was an open searching for answers to a broad range of questions using a variety of methodologies. Somehow,

probably because of the dominance of neo-Aristotilianism in criticism and positivistic behavioral science we fell, most of us, into one of two camps and lost the openness of our research. We have the opportunity to get back that openness. That opportunity is the best characterization I have for the current state of our research.

Footnotes

1. Malcolm Sillars, "Communication Research: The Uncertain 80's" Spectra 17 (February 1981), 5-6; Michael Smilowitz, "The Research Orientation of the Early Twentieth Century Speech Profession" unpublished, November 1982.
2. Richard Hofstadter and C. DeWitt Hardy, The Development and Scope of Higher Education in the United States (New York: Columbia, 1952), p. 62.
3. Herman Cohen, "Behavioral Science Comes To Communication: A Discipline in Search of Itself," unpublished, November 1982.
4. Carroll C. Arnold, "Rhetoric in America Since 1900," Reestablishing the Speech Profession eds. Robert T. Oliver and Marvin G. Bauer (Mineola, N. Y.: Speech Association of the Eastern States, 1959), p. 4.
5. Richard D. Rieke and Robert J. Kibler, "Early Steps Toward the Unification of Speech and Psychology in the 20th Century," Central States Speech Journal, 12 (Summer 1961) 128.
6. Clifford Geertz, "Blurred Genres," American Scholar, 49 (Spring 1980), 166.